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Ðe us ðas beagas geaf (He Who Gave Us These Rings): Sauron and the Perversion of Anglo-Saxon Ethos

Abstract

Notes that a central concept of Anglo-Saxon culture is the lord as ring-giver. Sauron, as Lord of the Rings, is a perversion of this concept. Other elements of *Lord of the Rings* reflect the Anglo-Saxon ethos as well

Additional Keywords

Anglo-Saxon culture in J.R.R. Tolkien; Ring-giving in Anglo-Saxon culture; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sauron

ðe us ðas bæagas geaf (He who gave us these rings)

Sauron and the Perversion of Anglo-Saxon Ethos

Leslie Stratynner

The connection between Tolkien's universe and Anglo-Saxon language and culture is an acknowledged one; after all, Tolkien was believed to be one of the most revered and celebrated Anglo-Saxonists of all time. Tolkien's reputation as a teacher, critic, and translator is firmly entrenched in medieval, especially Anglo-Saxon, scholarship. It is no wonder then, that in his fiction Tolkien would use language and concepts derivative of that period, and no wonder that Tolkien's debt to Anglo-Saxon culture would be explored by his own critics. There are essays on Tolkien and the Anglo-Saxons covering everything from Germanic concepts of Kingship¹ to the numerous tracts on Tolkien's debt to Old English in his creation of names and languages.² Still there seems to be an aspect of the connection which seems to have been ignored. It is so basic to both Middle-earth and Anglo-Saxon culture that perhaps it has been thought too obvious to pursue with any depth. Yet this very title of Tolkien's highest achievement, *The Lord of the Rings*, establishes the Anglo-Saxon practice of ring-giving as one of the fundamental foundations for Tolkien's creation of his world.

The "Lord of the Rings" is Sauron, and he meets many of the criteria of an Anglo-Saxon lord. On the most fundamental level, this is obvious in that he gives rings to his thanes. Tolkien, I would assert, uses the model of the Anglo-Saxon lord for Sauron, yet he does not employ it in a one-to-one correspondence; he makes fundamental changes to his "Lord," that while hearkening back to the Anglo-Saxon model, still establish Sauron as Tolkien's unique creation.

First, perhaps a little background is needed on the practice of ring-giving in the Anglo-Saxon world. To the Anglo-Saxons, ring-giving was a beneficial and reciprocal arrangement, in which the lord gave ornaments and rings in exchange for the love and loyalty of his thanes. This practice of dealing rings had a central role within the structure of the comitatus, or warrior band. Ring-giving was, in fact, the glue which held the band together. The group itself coalesced around the leadership of a lord within a hall, in which the lord gave gifts, rings mostly (those to be worn on the arm or the hand) as tokens of reward and protection. His thanes were loyal retainers in return. The warrior band, or lack thereof, is the governing social structure of Anglo-Saxon England, was to find and to serve a good lord, and become part of the comitatus.

The relationship between thane and lord is best typified in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*,³ in which

models of both good and bad lords can be found. It is interesting that time and time again, these lords are consistently defined in terms of their ability and willingness to deal out treasure. Bad lords hoard. Good lords share. In the opening lines of the poem we witness the funeral of the "leofne þeoden" (beloved prince-1. 34) Scyld. He was a beloved ruler because he was also a "beaga bryttan" (1.35) or ring giver. Hrothgar, Scyld's descendant, is also a good king, for he desires to build Heorot (the mead hall) in order to "eall gedælan / geongum ond ealdum, swylc him God sealde" or "distribute all to young and old such as God had given to him" (11.71-72). Hrothgar was true to his men. He kept his oaths, and "beagas dæle, / sincaet symle" ("deal rings, ornaments at the table"-11.81-82).

Of course, Beowulf also receives high praise. Wiglaf is willing to die by his side fighting the dragon, because Beowulf has been a good lord, and fulfilled his duty to give rings and share treasure. In fact, late in the poem, when Wiglaf challenges the cowardly thanes of Beowulf (who flee to the forest in order to escape the wrath of the dragon), he explicitly outlines the terms of the "contract" between the faithful lord and thane, hoping (to no avail) that this will inspire them to aid him:

lc ðæt mæl geman þær we medu þegun
ponne we geheton ussum hlaforde
in bior-sele ðe us ðas bæagas geaf,
þæt we him ða guð-geatwa gylðan woldan,
gif him pyslicu pearf gelumpe,
helmas ond heard sword.

I remember the time that we partook of mead
in the beer hall when we promised our lord,
he who gave us these rings, that we would repay
him for this war-gear, these helmets and hard swords,
if such need befell him.⁴ (11.2633-8)

The emphasis on the connection between rings given and the companionship of the mead-hall is obvious here. This was a sort of "social contract," but one that any good thane would be glad to make and fulfill.

Beowulf also contains examples of "bad" lords, and as the good lords are defined in terms of their willingness to deal treasure, the bad lords are defined by their miserly natures. The lords that hoard gold are typically evil in other areas as well. The most outstanding example of the "bad lord" within *Beowulf* is Heremod. Heremod is alluded to several times throughout the poem, but the main

information concerning him can be found in one of *Beowulf's* many digressions. In this digression, a scop sings of Heremod, an ancestor of Scyld's who was not only bloodthirsty, but even worse, would not share his good fortune with his thanes: "nallas beagas geaf / Denum æfter dome" ("not at all did he give rings to the Danes after glory"-1.2277). The dragon is another example of a "bad lord," he rules the treasure-hoard and keeps all for himself, though "ne byð him wihte ðy sel" ("it is not to him any the better"-1.2277). Rings and treasure are fine assets, but only as far as the lord is willing to share them.

Now this is all well and good, but how does it apply to *The Lord of the Rings*? If the title of the epic itself were not enough to make us aware of the importance of this concept to the trilogy, the very poem which serves as a prelude offers even more proof. Also entitled "The Lord of the Rings," this is essentially Sauron's version of the social contract which bound the Anglo-Saxon comitatus:

Three Rings for the Elven-Kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
one for the dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where shadows lie.

In *The lord of the Rings*, it is Sauron who is the "ring-giver." This is a name which is not arbitrarily proscribed to him, though of course it fits. According to *The Silmarillion*, in the Second Age, when he was involved in the making of the rings, "Sauron took to himself the name of Annatar, The Lord of Gifts . . ." (S p.287)⁷ He attempted to wield his will over all of Middle-earth through the giving of Rings of Power by controlling the Elves, Dwarves, and Men who wore them. His ring, the One Ring, "rules them all." Sauron's ring-giving parallels the practice of the Anglo-Saxons, yet while he does not fit the Anglo-Saxon role model of "bad" lord, no one would assert, surely, that Sauron is a good lord. What is he then?

Sauron does not ignore the practice of ring-giving, and hoard all for himself; instead he perverts it. He deals rings, but his rings, the ones that he controls, are tokens of evil, gifts designed not to reward but to enslave. The One Ring is not used to foster benevolence and good will, it is used to bring the other rings, and presumably their wearers, into Sauron's control. The ring is used as a tool to imprison, to "blind in darkness." Sauron is worse than a "bad" Anglo-Saxon lord, who hoards treasure instead of sharing it. Sauron deals rings, yet his rings bring alienation and despair, instead of the camaraderie of the comitatus. Sauron is the antithesis, the black reflection of a noble Anglo-Saxon leader; he is "The Dark Lord on his dark throne." His rings are not tokens of good will, of love between a lord and thane, but symbols of Sauron's desire to control, and fused with his own malevolence. Jane Nitzsche, in *Tolkien's Art*, asserts that the enemy "functions primarily as a symbolic perversion of Christian rather than Germanic values" (Nitzsche, 118), but can we ignore the

emphasis of ring-giving in *The Lord of the Rings*, or the Anglo-Saxon practice which doubtless inspired it, without omitting a vital aspect of the nature of Sauron, who is the source for the very quest itself?

In fact, Tolkien has taken the practice of ring-giving and turned it on its ear; it is the basis for Sauron's character, but still Sauron's character is wholly his own. Sauron is a lord who understands the concept of rings in exchange for loyalty and service, yet he has twisted it to his own dark purpose. If it is true, as David Harvey states, that "The essential feature in all the (Sauron's) servants is that they have been corrupted physically or in spirit," (Harvey, 62), then it is not a far leap to believe that Sauron's practices would be corruptions as well, and the modes for this corruption is found in Tolkien's understanding of Anglo-Saxon culture.

This carries over, naturally, into Sauron's relationship with his "thanes," and he does have thanes much like any other Anglo-Saxon lord. His "comitatus" is the Nazgul. Of course Sauron is in league with orcs and even some men, but it is the Nine Riders who really form his "warrior band." Who are the riders, and why do they serve the Dark Lord? They do not serve him because they love him, but because they are the slaves of the rings which Sauron has given them, the "Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die," and of the One Ring, Sauron's ring, which rules them all. They are the Nazgul, the ringwraiths, the doomed souls who fell under the spell of Sauron has dealt rings to his thanes, and his thanes do indeed render him service in return, but the relationship has become perverse and twisted.

All of this becomes clear when we examine the riders and Sauron and how they function as an evil comitatus, akin to the Anglo-Saxon comitatus in form, and yet not in ethos. As Sauron is a dark mirror of a good Anglo-Saxon lord, so are the Nazgul dark mirrors of noble thanes. Like good Anglo-Saxon thanes they do the bidding of their lord, and are unquestioningly faithful to him. They are not bad thanes, as are *Beowulf's* (with the notable exception of Wiglaf), for a bad thane abandons his lord. The rings which the Nazgul possess, as in Anglo-Saxon culture, indicate the promise of loyalty and service in times of need, a promise which the Nazgul aptly fulfill. Yet these wraiths, these undead, did not enter into service to the Dark Lord because of a magnanimous impulse to offer aid, and to receive friendship and rings in return. Sauron bent these men to his will through their desire and his promises to make them both strong and deathless. On the surface these promises would seem to have been kept, but though the Nazgul wield power through their terror, they are wholly subject to the Dark Lord. Thus, paradoxically, they exist as some of the least powerful creatures in the book, for they have no will of their own. And though it might seem otherwise, the Nazgul are not deathless. Even the One Ring cannot grant more life, only stretch what life one has. The Nazgul are undead, as is Sauron himself, a state of being which of all others in Middle-earth is least desirable. It is in keeping with the character of Sauron to warp even

the promises to his own followers, making slaves of them instead of willing retainers:

They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them... they fell under the thrall of the ring that they bore and under the dominion of the one, which was Sauron's... The Nazgul were they, the ringwraiths, the Enemy's most terrible servants; darkness went with them, and they cried with the voices of death. (S p. 289)

Wiglaf's experience with the unfaithful thanes of Beowulf proves that ring-giving in Anglo-Saxon culture was a bond, but definitely not enslavement. Of course, Beowulf's thanes don't keep up with their part of the bargain, and are shamed as a result, but inherent in the Anglo-Saxon ethos is that the thanes will perform service and remain loyal to their lord because they want to, not because they have to. Sauron's thanes, the Nazgul, are loyal because they are his slaves. They have to.

If we can agree that a fundamental element of Sauron's character is his role as a perversion of a good Anglo-Saxon ring-giver, and can understand this in relation to his "thanes," we are then in the position to examine the effect of the ring, the One Ring, on its bearers. Are any other perversions of Anglo-Saxon ethos evident in *The Lord of the Rings*? The ruling rings is a symbol of all that the Anglo-Saxon ethos found "perverse;" selfishness, alienation, hatred of one's friends, yet these character traits are usually not very welcome in other societies as well. There are, however, specific instances within *The Lord of the Rings* which clearly recall Anglo-Saxon ethics, and instances where we are also presented with perversions of those ethics. In order to do this we must examine the ring in terms of the effect on its bearers.

Gollum was not always Gollum. He was once better than the small slimy creature that Bilbo finds hiding in the wretched darkness under the Misty Mountains. He was once, Smeagol, part of a society of river-dwelling creatures very like unto hobbits. Gollum began his descent when he came under the influence of the One Ring, which in his case transpired immediately upon his first seeing it. His friend Deagol found it after falling into the river while fishing. It was Smeagol's birthday, so Smeagol was so overcome by lust for the ring that he strangled him.

What does this have to do with a perversion of the Anglo-Saxon ethos? In Anglo-Saxon society, the most heinous and nefarious of crimes was the murder of one's brother or compatriot. The crime of fratricide deeply offended Anglo-Saxon sensibilities, which stressed the brotherly cohesion of the comitatus. This can be most clearly seen in *Beowulf*, when Grendel, scourge of Hrothgar's thanes, is described as a being "in Cain's kin." (line 107) There is no mention in *Beowulf* of original sin. It is Cain's crime of fratricide which more affects the Anglo-Saxon heart. Beowulf himself, when faced with the taunting disrespect of Unferth, accuses him of murdering his own brothers (line 587). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the One Ring does not unify the brotherly relation between the friends Deagol and Smeagol; it tears it asunder. The ring

brings hatred and jealousy, the very emotions which prompted Cain and Grendel, and those same emotions fuel Gollum throughout both *The Hobbit* and the trilogy.

Bilbo remains relatively unaffected by the ring in comparison with Gollum. Yes, he does lie about finding it at first (a lie which bothers Gandalf in retrospect), but the power of the ring over Bilbo is kept to a minimum, even though he bears it for many decades. I would assert that the cause of this can be traced to Bilbo's adherence to a popular Anglo-Saxon ethos in his encounter with Gollum.

Gandalf later makes much of the fact that Bilbo did not kill Gollum in the cave after the ill-fated riddle game, though he surely had motive and opportunity (for Bilbo was armed and invisible, and Gollum was blocking the exit). "It was pity that stayed his hand" (FR 92) Gandalf says to Frodo in his retelling of the event. Gandalf firmly believes that Bilbo did not take too much damage from the ring because he began his "ownership" of it thus:

Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With pity. (FR 92)

Yet there is another factor involved. It is not merely pity which causes Bilbo to spare Gollum's miserable life; the reaction that Bilbo has even before he feels pity is that it is unfair to attack Gollum, who is unarmed, while Bilbo himself is armed and also invisible.

He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. (H 92)

This is the precise response of Beowulf himself when he is faced with Grendel. Beowulf refuses to fight with armour and a sword because Grendel does not fight with one, even though Grendel surely intends to kill him (as Gollum surely intends to kill Bilbo). Beowulf goes unarmed into combat with Grendel because Grendel "Nat he para goda" (l. 681) or "does not know of those good things" (meaning armour).

Thus it is Bilbo's ingrained sense of justice and fair play, as well as his pity for Gollum, which help him to overcome the evil pull of the ring. The ultimate success of the quest can even be traced back to this incident, since it is not, of course, Frodo who causes the ring to be cast into Mount Doom, but Gollum. Bilbo, adhering to an Anglo-Saxon inspired ethos of justice and fair play, spares Gollum, who lives to "succeed" when Frodo fails.

When we come to analyzing Frodo's association with the ring, an analogy with Anglo-Saxon ethos becomes more difficult. The Anglo-Saxons might have found the ring's effect abhorrent, but so, as I have stated would nearly everyone else. It is not enough to say that the pull of the ring tends to alienate Frodo from his friends (which it obviously does) and leave it at that. What Frodo's burden does illustrate, however, is the workings of an initiation into Sauron's dark comitatus.

Recall that Sauron and his thanes, the Nazgul, do not

wish to destroy Frodo; they wish to make him a slave, as the Nazgul are slaves, and thus initiate him as another of Sauron's retainers. Frodo, by virtue of the fact that he is ring-bearer, already has a foot into their world, and as such he is being drawn into the service of the Dark Lord. It is not something which he chooses. He is commanded by both Sauron and the Nazgul, and he finds those commands almost impossible to resist, such as in his experience when he attempts to escape from the Nine Riders near the ford at Bruinen:

...a strange reluctance seized him. Checking the horse to a walk, he turned and looked back. The Riders seemed to sit upon their great steeds like threatening statues upon a hill, dark and solid, while all the land about them receded as if into a mist. Suddenly he knew in his heart that they were commanding him to wait. (FR 284)

When Frodo ascends Amon Hen, the ring still on his finger after his escape from Boromir, we see again that Frodo's relationship with the Dark Lord is not merely one of enemy to enemy. As the bearer of the ring, Frodo is already at least partially the thane of Sauron, despite Frodo's reasoned response to the contrary. Sauron is searching for his ring, casting out his eye over Middle-earth to find it. On Amon Hen, the Seat of Seeing, Frodo is especially vulnerable:

And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. A Fierce eager will was there. It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him... he threw himself from the seat, crouching, covering his head with his grey hood.

He heard himself crying out: Never, never! Or was it: Verily I come, I come to you? He could not tell. (FR 519)

Even as Frodo attempts to hide himself, he feels the will of his Lord, and is nearly compelled to yield himself to him. Frodo is rapidly losing his power to choose; his will is being superseded by the will of Sauron. It is growing harder and harder for him to "flee to the woods" as Beowulf's thanes did. He is forced against his will to do the bidding of Sauron, and it is the ring which compels him to do this, as rings commanded and exchange of service to the Anglo-Saxons. Of course, Frodo is not wholly in Sauron's control, perhaps not even mostly, but he has not borne the ring long, and his will, such that he has, is strong against it. He knows about Sauron and thus cannot be ensnared as easily as the Nine were. Yet as Frodo continues to have and use the ring, he feels the increase of power of the Dark Lord who rules it. A prolonged use of the ring, even had he strayed far from Sauron, would have denied Frodo the power to ever return to his world, and made him an initiate in Sauron's dark comitatus. A terrifying fate indeed.

To the Anglo-Saxons, initiation into a comitatus was not a thing to be feared, but treasured. Rings were a physical manifestation of the bond of love between a Lord and a thane, which was a wholly mutual arrangement. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron mirrors this relationship but infuses his ring with his own malevolent will, and thus

nothing good can come out of it. The Ring cannot be a token of anything except Sauron's evil, which binds him to his retainers in the darkness. Sauron's ring, the One Ring, is not bond, but bondage.

Notes

1. See especially Chapter 4 of Jane Chance Nitzsche's *Tolkien's Art - A Mythology for England*.
2. See especially T.A. Shippey's "Creation from Philology in The Lord of the Rings". J.R.R. Tolkien, *Scholar and Storyteller*. P. 286-315.
3. All references to Beowulf are from Klaeber.
4. All translations from the Anglo-Saxon are mine.
5. J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*. Houghton Mifflin edition, 1977. Abbreviations of Tolkien's works in this paper are as follows: H=*The Hobbit*, FR=*The Fellowship of the Ring*, TT=*The Two Towers*, RK=*The Return of the King*, S=*The Silmarillion*. All references to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are made to the 1965 Ballantine edition.

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